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# Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws parallels between Tsar Nicholas I and current Russian President Vladimir Putin with respect to their use of nationalism to justify statist policies and political authoritarianism. Building upon insights by Alexander Gerschenkron about the economic development of “backwards” states, it argues that both Nicholas and Putin have rhetorically used Western concepts such as nationalism and democracy to legitimize their rule but have modified them to give them more statist content. Under Nicholas, this was exemplified in the tripartite (Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality) Official Nationality policy. Putin has emphasized patriotism, power, and statism to justify centralization of power and authoritarian policies. Putin's policies and rhetoric are strong analogs to those of Nicholas. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to explain state-inspired Russian nationalism and how it has been aligned with authoritarian politics, as well as specifying similarities between present and past in Russia.

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## 1. Introduction

Much attention has been devoted to the issue of how Vladimir Putin is a product of the Russian/Soviet past. It has become a veritable cliché that his rule resembles that of Russia under the tsars.<sup>1</sup> Biographies of Putin stress his background as

a KGB agent and desire to emulate his former boss, Yuri Andropov, a former spy-chief who sought to modernize and save the Soviet system (Gessen, 2012). The search for historical analogs to explain contemporary Soviet/Russian leaders, has, of course, a venerable history, with the Ivan IV–Stalin pairing perhaps the most well-known (Yanov, 1981).

This article aims to give more content to the at-times simplistic label of Putin as the newest in the long line of Russian tsars, who, it should be emphasized, varied greatly in terms of the style and substance of their rule. While it is clear that Putin is not a Westernizing liberal, it is also apparent that comparisons to Stalin or Ivan IV are grossly exaggerated.<sup>2</sup> Despite his roots in St. Petersburg, the

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<sup>1</sup> For examples, see Time's headline “A Tsar is Born” when it crowned Putin Man of the Year in 2007 (*Time*, December 19, 2007). Upon Putin's re-election in 2012, commentators suggested that “Tsar Putin Returns to Kremlin,” (Human Rights House Network, March 12, 2012), and that Putin was a “21st Century Czar” (*Globe and Mail* [Toronto], March 3, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> While one can point to repressive aspects of contemporary Russia, it is not a totalitarian state based on widespread terror. For a fantasy/fictional work that advances the notion that Russia may soon resemble aspects of Ivan IV's Russia, see Sorokin (2011). Putin is also not seeking to restore Soviet communism. His famous quote is “He who does not regret the break-up of the Soviet Union has no heart; he who wants to revive it in its previous form has no head.”

comparison with Peter I is also, in our view, off the mark.<sup>3</sup> This article instead finds an interesting and insightful parallel between Putin and Nicholas I (1825–1855), the “Iron Tsar.” Like Putin, Nicholas was conservative, insofar as he valued the old order and was against sweeping reforms to transform Russia or re-make it in the Western image. At the same time, however, he faced a crisis and had to bow to certain political realities, making some rhetorical nods to new political ideas and movements, in particular the notion of nationalism. However, he adapted these ideas to suit his own agenda, giving them a highly statist character. Putin has done the same, both in terms of invoking nationalism and modifying the idea of “democracy” in accordance with his own priorities. The result, in both cases, was the adoption of some elements of contemporary political discourse but very little of its substance, particularly with respect to political liberalization.

This article will explore aspects of Nicholas’ and Putin’s rule, focusing on the use of nationalism and efforts to preserve and even extend state power. In both cases, leaders invoke history and aspects of Russian exceptionalism to both define the Russian nation and justify authoritarian rule. In this way, they can be viewed as innovative, albeit with the aim of preserving much of the old order. Like Nicholas, however, Putin is finding that such a strategy is not cost-free and is arguably having diminishing returns.

## 2. Russia, “backwardness,” and statist adaptation

The basis of the comparison in this paper rests on a fundamental insight made by Alexander Gerschenkron in his classic work, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Gerschenkron, 1962). Gerschenkron’s fundamental thesis is that late modernizers – states that are “backwards” compared to the most “advanced” states – will follow a distinct development path, one that tends to “differ fundamentally from that of an advanced country” (Gerschenkron, 1962, 7). In his examination of the organizational structures of industrialization in more “backwards” states such as Germany, Bulgaria and Russia, Gerschenkron notes that they do not have to be innovators in order to experience economic development. True, they are playing “catch up” and their development in many respects will be behind that of the leading states, but they can also develop relatively quickly as they do not have to wait and see what works and what does not. They can simply borrow and adapt what the innovators have already done. This is the classic “advantage of backwardness.” Moreover, and this is the crucial element for our purposes, the most efficient method of development is to employ the power and resources of the state. There is little need (or, for that matter, ability) to experiment with various ideas or develop an independent entrepreneurial class or open markets. The blueprint for development at a given stage has already been

crafted. The state, as the most powerful organization in these countries and the only one with coercive power, can then marshal the necessary resources for building the infrastructure to foster development. The classic example, in the Soviet case, was the use of the mass production techniques of Ford and Taylor, albeit under a regime of state planning and ownership.

The net result, in Gerschenkron’s analysis of late 19th–early 20th century economic development, is that “backwards” states will adapt aspects of the economic system from the more developed states. However, the two societies are not mirror images of each other. Development in “backwards” states will take on a decidedly statist cast, with certain repercussions, including less likelihood for political liberalization.

Our analysis borrows from Gerschenkron, but we are more interested in how a “backwards” state adapts political ideas that originally developed elsewhere. Gerschenkron himself acknowledges that the intellectual climate surrounding development will differ between an advanced and “backwards” state, with a “New Deal in emotions” required in the latter case (Gerschenkron, 1962, 25). Our interest is less in ideas of economic development (e.g. socialism) and more in nationalism, which became an important political force in the French Revolution and offered a potential challenge to Tsarist rule in early 19th century Russia, and liberal democracy, which became an important norm in the late 20th century but has been seen by Putin as problematic in the Russian case. Nicholas I would eventually embrace nationalism and Putin claims to be building democracy in Russia, but each leader (re)defined these terms to suit their particular needs. Furthermore, as Gerschenkron found in the case of economic development, in both cases these ideas, originally invoked by liberals against the power of the state, assumed a statist character. Let us now turn to the development of Russian nationalism under Nicholas I.

## 3. Nicholas I’s experience with nationalism

The French Revolution, with its ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty, significantly influenced developments in Russia prior to and early in Nicholas’s reign. Tsarist Russia, of course, did not welcome the events in Paris and fought against revolutionary France in the Napoleonic Wars. However, this conflict dramatically expanded consciousness of Russian nationhood. Russian elites abandoned French and began to speak Russian. The military took soldiers from a wide array of social strata, forming a more cohesive Russian identity under the common cause of rejecting Napoleon’s forces (Billington, 2004, 7–9). The “sense of what it meant to be Russian” was intensified and the war “awoke the Russian people to life” (Hosking, 2001, 259). Even as they were fighting Napoleon, soldiers exposed to the ideas of the French Revolution during the 1813–1815 campaign in Central and Western Europe found much to admire in patriotic movements, representative institutions, and the rule of law (Hosking, 2001, 260). Upon return to Russia many former soldiers spearheaded organizations and secret societies to press for changes to the

<sup>3</sup> Such comparisons were made in the early 2000s, when it appeared that Putin might put Russia on a Westernizing course (see Bohlen (2002)). However, that course has, in crucial respects been abandoned, and Putin’s conservatism and embrace of the Orthodox faith, which we detail in this paper, deviates significantly from the main aspects of Peter’s reforms.

autocracy and serfdom of Russia. One member of such an organization wrote that “we were the children of 1812” (Figs, 2002, 72).

The push for political reform in Russia reached its apogee in December 1825, during the coronation of Nicholas I, when nobles and officers favoring reform staged an abortive coup. The Decembrists, as this group would later be called, encompassed a diverse range of views, but in the main they embraced the “Spirit of the Age” that demanded constitutional government. The fact that Russia would have to borrow ideas from others was fully acknowledged. In the words of N.I. Turgenev, “everything that must henceforward flourish in her [Russia’s] midst she must perforce borrow from Europe, she could never graft anything on her own ancient institutions” (Schapiro, 1967, 25). The Decembrists, however, were poorly organized and their rebellion was fairly easily put down.

The most important effect of the Decembrist Rebellion – and, one might add, that was re-enforced by the nationalist uprising in Poland in 1830–1831 – was how it put the new Tsar, Nicholas I, on a path of “unrelenting reaction” (Burleigh, 2005, 171). Against the opinion of his advisors, Nicholas published a manifesto in July 1826 regarding his personal feelings toward the Decembrists. He portrayed them as “monsters,” inspired by foreign ideas and destined to be rejected by the Russian people (*narod*) who are naturally inclined to embrace monarchy. He maintained that

The heart of Russia has remained and will always remain inaccessible to [them]. The name of Russia will not be disgraced by treason to Throne and Fatherland. On the contrary, We saw on this occasion new examples of devotion...In a state where love for the Monarch and devotion to the Throne are based on natural traits of the people, where there exist laws native to the land and a firm rule, all the efforts of evil doers will be futile and mad: they can conceal themselves in darkness, but at their first appearance, rejected by common indignation, they will be crushed by the might of the law. (Riasanovsky, 1959, 125–126)

This manifesto laid the groundwork for Nicholas’ construction of the Russian people as authority-loving, thereby modifying growing norms of popular sovereignty in such a way that maintained the authoritarian status quo. In the words of the manifesto, only “from above” – whether from God or Tsar is unclear – could “institutions be improved, defects remedied, and abuses reformed” (Anderson, 1987, 170). Nicholas remained emotionally involved with the Decembrist events throughout his reign, which would subsequently reject any notion of political liberalization and deal harshly with groups and individuals deemed threatening to the Tsar’s unfettered power.

While it would therefore be accurate to describe Nicholas as conservative or even reactionary, Nicholas did introduce something new into official Russian political discourse and ideology: nationalism. Nationalism, of course, was a powerful force in the French Revolution, and throughout the 19th century it emerged in different guises in a variety of environments. Our interest is less in the socioeconomic conditions that gave rise to nationalism or its

various strains (e.g. civic versus ethnic nationalism).<sup>4</sup> Rather, the key point is that the main thrust of nationalism, as it developed in the French Revolution and in Europe in the early 19th century, was popular sovereignty, which was combined with “concepts of individual liberty and rational cosmopolitanism” (Kohn, 1944, 329). In other words, the national community – however this was precisely defined – was rightfully endowed with political power. This was exemplified in the French revolutionaries’ Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which stated that “the principle of sovereignty resides essentially in the nation; no body of men, no individual, can exercise authority that does not expressly emanate from it.” Their revolutionary anthem, the Marseillaise, called for the “*enfants de la patrie*” to “irrigate the soil” with the “tainted blood of tyrants” (Lakoff, 2011, 135). Throughout the first half of the 19th century, nationalism would be invoked as a liberating force – in Greece, in Poland, in France, in Italy, and in the revolutions in the “springtime of nations” of 1848.<sup>5</sup>

It should be clear, therefore, that nationalism, in this respect, would not be attractive to a tsar such as Nicholas that claimed supreme political authority. At the same time, however, he could not completely ignore it: it played a role in the Decembrist rebellion, was the primary force behind the Polish revolt, and was gaining currency in Europe. His post-Decembrist manifesto, while not “nationalist” in intent, nonetheless posited a role for the people, albeit one that required loyalty to the tsar. Put differently, the connection with the tsar would define what it meant to be Russian. In this way, the tsar would be a central figure defining the political community itself. Nationalism, originally developed as a liberating force, would be tied to the autocrat in Russia.

Nationalism played an important role in maintaining Nicholas’ rule. In 1833, Nicholas I’s newly appointed Minister of the Department of Education, Sergei Uvarov, sent out his first decree, which would later become known as Nicholas I’s policy of Official Nationality, the first case of a tsar sponsoring an explicit state ideology since Ivan IV (Hosking, 2001, 267). The decree stated “Our common obligation consists in this that the education of the people be conducted, according to the Supreme intention of our August Monarch, in the joint spirit of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality ” (Riasanovsky, 1959, 73). This three-pronged policy, a conscious counterpart to the Liberty, Equality, Fraternity troika of the French Revolution, was a reactionary attempt to legitimize the pre-existing autocracy in the framework of a liberalizing social climate.

Orthodoxy meant devotion and adherence to the Russian Orthodox Church. Christianity provided the basic historical framework for the officials of Official Nationality,

<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, a rich literature on the development of nationalism. Classic references are Kohn (1944), Gellner (1983), and Greenfeld (1992).

<sup>5</sup> One of the most powerful statements with respect to this conception of nationalism comes from Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini’s *Duties of Man*, in which the Italian working class is told, “Do not beguile yourselves with the hope of emancipation from unjust social conditions if you do not first conquer a Country for yourselves” (Brown, Nardin, and Rengger (2002), 481).

but while Nicholas and his followers respected other forms of Christianity, the Orthodox Church was the only form seen as totally authentic (Riasanovsky, 1959, 85). This underscoring of the importance of religion was partially a rejection of the eighteenth century religious skepticism of the European Enlightenment, the dangerous product of which was strongly on Nicholas's mind with the revolutionary ethos already infecting Russia. Nicholas believed that in order to suppress these dangerous ideas, people needed to receive a more attentive home education on proper morals and character, which were to be defined by the government. Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was also essentially subservient to the state, diluting the possibility of Orthodoxy's significance as an independent force. Henceforth, the ROC would play a strong hand in teaching obedience to authority, whether it be to tsar, officer, or landlord. Because religion was already a dominant phenomenon, the ROC provided a very convenient network for the dissemination of state interests and values.

Official Nationality's second pillar, autocracy, was the most straightforward of the three. It was essentially a proclamation against any discussion of constitutional government. There was to be no political role for the Russian people, and no change in the status of most Russians as serfs. In the latter aspect, Nicholas found an ally with the nobility, who naturally wanted to preserve their control over the serfs. Its proponents justified it both with reference to Russian history as well as negative views about human nature in general and the capacities of the average Russian in particular. Mikhail Pogodin, a prominent historian whose father had been a serf, was a strong proponent of state power (*gosudarstvennik*) and supporter of Nicholas' autocratic reign. He contended that "the Russian people is marvelous, but marvelous so far only in potential. In actuality, it is low, horrid, and beastly" (Tolz, 2001, 78). The aforementioned Uvarov believed that Adam's fall was the "key to all history" and man's essential wickedness required autocratic rule (Anderson, 1987, 174). Nicholas himself embraced a pessimistic view of the capabilities of most Russians (Riasanovsky, 1959, 99). These ideas were all employed to present the benign tsar, a gift from God, as the essential glue that held Russian society together. Lastly, autocracy was not just the clearest of the three points, it was the only one that offered any real solidifying force for the people of the Russian Empire; everybody could identify as a subject of the tsar, regardless of creed or ethnicity.

Nationality (*narodnost*) was the vaguest of these three terms and potentially problematic in a multinational empire in which many of the leading officials were ethnically German. The addition of this term, however, acknowledged a role for the Russian people (*narod*) as well as the influence of ideas of nationalism within Russia. If it were not for this final point, the whole policy would have been a direct replication of the mentality behind the Holy Alliance of Nicholas' predecessor, Alexander I. The Holy Alliance contextualized the superiority and necessity of monarchical rule within a heavily religious framework against liberal, constitutional ideas, but Nicholas did not leave it at that. There had to be an answer offered to the nationally-oriented dissent that shocked Nicholas's early years as tsar. Official Nationality's third point, as Geoffrey Hosking

explains it, "was an obeisance to the latest developments in European culture, a pale reflection of post-French revolutionary nationalism" (Hosking, *Russia*, 267). By including this element, Nicholas' government could claim recognition of the will of the people without having to provide any institutionalized route for the expression of public opinion. In other words, it was *politically* hollow compared to the original intention behind Western conceptions of nationalism, which was largely directed *against* monarchical power. In Russia, nationalism took on a cultural, Romantic cast, manifested in intellectual and artistic projects (e.g. landscape painting) to foster notions of national unity and bridge the massive gap between the landed elite and the peasantry (Ely, 2002, 134).

This is also the period in which the well-known Slavophile versus Westernizer debate was born, with the former, inspired by Herder's ideas of a distinct mission for various peoples, imbuing the *narod* with unique, praiseworthy attributes. Attempts to express these ideas were often met with resistance from Nicholas's government, which tried to oversee developments in the various debates over what constituted the basis of Russian identity. While Nicholas had more affinity for the Slavophile perspective (which like him celebrated the Orthodox faith), he could not fully embrace a perspective, that by celebrating the common Russian person, could potentially promote their political empowerment and thereby challenge the autocracy's role as the absolute identity for the Russian Empire. In this vein, the only concrete virtue of the Russian people that ideologists of Official Nationality supplied was humility (*smirenje*), "best manifested in the people's voluntary acceptance of the unlimited powers of the tsar" (Tolz, 2001, 78). For its part, the state, personified in the tsar himself, had, according to Uvarov, "all means necessary to know the extent of world-wide progress in enlightenment and the actual needs of the Fatherland" (Anderson, 1987, 176). There was no room and no need for popular sovereignty. Historical studies on Nicholas have thus usually seen Official Nationality's third point, nationality, as simply an appendage to autocracy, tied to the historical development of the Russian state and used to justify an ostensibly benevolent, autocratic rule over docile, obedient subjects (Riasanovsky, 1959, 124). In this respect, the development of Russian nationalism under Nicholas reflects Greenfeld's observation that "the underlying ideas of nationality were shaped and modified in accordance with the situational constraints of the actors, and with the aspirations, frustration, and interests which these constraints generated" (Greenfeld, 1992, 15).

To conclude our discussion of Nicholas, there are two central points. First, for Nicholas I, nationalism served an important function. It was a means to legitimate his rule by connecting him directly to the people. In so doing, he emphasized an organic tie between ruler and ruled while breaking down some of the feudal and agrarian bonds of the old order. In this sense, Official Nationality also served the cause of "right-wing modernization" (Allensworth, 1998, 39). However, from the Tsar's perspective, nationalism, as some Decembrists had envisioned, could not be imported wholesale without changes. Thus, the key was to reformulate it in such a way to graft it onto pre-existing ideas and support his right to rule. In this regard, an



important observation is that he – Nicholas – was the one who was able to define the Russian nation in his own terms and carve out a space for himself as an indispensable part of the *narod*. After the suppression of the Decembrists, there was no effective countervoice within Russian civil society to challenge the Tsar.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in contrast to other parts of Eastern Europe, which were, in Kohn's terms, also in a "backward stage of social and political development" (Kohn, 1944, 329) where nationalism developed among intellectuals and often assumed a more cultural and ethnic hue, Russian nationalism under Nicholas assumed a *statist* character.<sup>7</sup> Just as the Russian state was by necessity associated with economic development in conditions of "backwardness," it was also able to (re)define and direct nationalism, a revolutionary concept born in Western Europe and connected to political liberalization and empowerment of the people, for its own conservative cause of supporting autocratic rule.

#### 4. The (re)defining of nationalism and democracy under Putin

Nicholas' notion of nationality remained influential throughout the Tsarist period, with the Tsar serving as the kindly but occasionally stern father (*batyushka*) to the Russian nation. The Romanovs' legitimacy, however, increasingly came under attack in the late 19th and early 20th century. The overthrow of Nicholas II in 1917 and subsequent seizure of power by the Bolsheviks and creation of a Soviet state that emphasized class identity led to a re-definition of nationality, one that eschewed religious or ethnic markers and instead sought to create *homo Sovieticus*. This project, of course, ultimately failed, in part due to ethnic nationalist mobilization by the peoples of the Soviet Union. For post-communist Russia and the other Soviet successor states, the 1990s would be a trying period, one in which various ideas were employed in the cause of nation and state-building.<sup>8</sup>

In 2000, Vladimir Putin stepped into this breach, one that he later acknowledged was a "deep, systemic crisis" (Putin, 2012). The Russian economy had collapsed in the 1990s and many believed that Russia itself was at risk of political disintegration. Representative, liberal democracy – a foreign idea imported from the West – had been tried in the 1990s, but by the end of the decade many Russians associated the idea of democracy with political, economic, and social failure.<sup>9</sup> Putin, like Nicholas, was a restorationist.

Just as Nicholas wanted Russia to put the Decembrist revolt behind it, Putin sought to move Russia out of the multidimensional crisis generated in the first decade of post-communism. Putin, however, could not simply re-impose the Soviet order. A return to full-fledged authoritarianism absent of any democratic trapping would have been both costly and difficult. Like nationalism in the early 19th century, democratic norms and expectations could not simply be rejected out of hand or ignored. Putin himself, for example, acknowledged in a widely-cited December 1999 manifesto, "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium," that despite all the problems of the 1990s "we have to value the benefits of democracy to Russia" (Putin, 1999). Much like how Nicholas I faced a crisis and was forced to respond to emerging Western norms of popular sovereignty vested in the abstract will of the nation, Putin had to do so again, this time with respect to *democratic* popular sovereignty, which was essential to the government's domestic and international legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> Like Nicholas, he would have to be creative in employing new, potentially threatening ideas, to his conservative cause.

Putin's rule, of course, rested on a number of bases, including oil and gas wealth, coercion, corruption, and his own personal charisma.<sup>11</sup> He also added powers to the already "super-presidential" Russian system. His approval ratings remained high, in part due to tangible changes in Russian society but also helped by state control over the media. However, there was also an ideational aspect to Putin's rule that served to legitimize his *statist* approach to governance. One of these ideas was linking nationalism to the governing regime, re-animating some of the same elements as Nicholas. Another was re-defining democracy in such a way that it would end up serving his *statist* project.

Putin, far more than Yeltsin or Gorbachev, has made appeals to Russian nationalism. Russian nationalism, of course, contains numerous elements, including at times strongly xenophobic and anti-Western attitudes. There are also aspects of the civic (*rossianin*) versus ethnic (*russkii*) debate over who constitutes the nation. For our purposes, however, the key element is how nationalism has been defined by Putin and his allies to serve a *statist*, often authoritarian agenda. Before even becoming president, for example, Putin made this connection when he proposed three fundamental values for the Russian nation in his aforementioned 1999 "Turn of the Millennium" manifesto: patriotism, power, and statism (Putin, 1999). These have clear similarities with Russian nationalism as defined by Nicolas I. Indeed, Laruelle affirms that "contemporary state nationalism [under Putin] is directly inspired by the famous triptych 'Autocracy, Nationality, Orthodoxy' formulated in the nineteenth century by Sergei Uvarov" (Laruelle, 2009, 198).

The parallels begin with Putin's conception of patriotism. This is defined by Putin as pride in one's country,

<sup>6</sup> For example, Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest literary talent, who had connections to the Decembrists, was a supporter of the monarchy and was the "only hope for orderly progress" (Schapiro (1967), 56). Nikolai Gogol, whose writings pointed to numerous faults in Russian society, also supported autocracy (Anderson, 1987, 174).

<sup>7</sup> Russification, based on a more ethnic concept of Russian (*russkii*) identity, would later become more prominent in the second half of the 19th century.

<sup>8</sup> For more on debates over Russian nationalism in the post-communist period, see Allensworth (1998) and Laruelle (2009). For a volume that emphasizes aspects of state-building, see McFaul (2001).

<sup>9</sup> Many works have examined the weakening of democracy and civic participation in Russia. For a comprehensive empirical approach, see Fish (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Popular sovereignty is the notion that the people are the source of all political power. The nation can be used to define the will of the people, or under a democracy the people directly, or indirectly through representatives, vote on issues. For a more detailed theoretical analysis, see Yack (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Numerous works offer in-depth treatment on the foundations of Putin's regime. In addition to Fish (2005), see Shetsova (2005).

resting on the country's history and accomplishments. The past would therefore play an important role in Putin's nation- and state-building project. Thomas Parland, a Finnish expert on Russian nationalism, notes that "the new post-Soviet state administration could not appear *ex nihilo* but had to establish itself, at least partly, in the context of earlier historical experience and time-honored attitudes" (Parland, 2005, 187). There is, perhaps, nothing remarkable or exceptional about this. However, it is how history is used and framed that is important. As noted previously, in the case of Nicholas I the Official Nationality policy invoked history in such a way that portrayed Russians as passive or incapable of self-rule and the Tsar as a father/savior of the nation. It did not empower the people. Similarly, Putin's notion of patriotism looks first and foremost to the state and existing political authorities, grounded in a narrative that would be familiar to Nicholas I. Putin does not believe the Russian people are capable of growing civil society on their own and that they must therefore be stimulated by the state (Evans, 2008, 904). Putin, looking back on his options in 2000 when he assumed power, noted that due to the lack of democratic institutions and a weak civil society, he was "forced" to restore authority and power to the state (Putin, 2012). In 2008, in a speech that echos many of the sentiments of Nicholas, he stated that "from the very beginning, Russia was created as a super-centralized state. That's practically laid down in its genetic code, its traditions, and the mentality of its people" (Evans, 2008, 903). This use of history is employed to justify Putin's *vertikal* of power that has centralized authority in the hands of the president and to uphold the legitimacy of the idea of "managed [*upravlayemaia*] democracy," discussed more below. The net effect has been to reinvigorate old Russian paradigms of the humble nation bowing before an authoritative figure.

Unlike Yeltsin, who rejected the Soviet period as a black hole in Russian history (Medvedev & Shriver, 2000, 252), Putin has borrowed freely from the Tsarist and Soviet past, mixing aspects of both with more contemporary elements. For example, the Soviet national anthem was revived for use as the national anthem of the Russian Federation, but the lyrics were rewritten to remove all traces of communist ideology while emphasizing Russian greatness. Interestingly, the melody for the Soviet anthem was borrowed from a popular patriotic opera from Nicholas I's reign that premiered in 1836, "A Life for the Tsar." There are other examples in post-Soviet Russia of this blending of various periods in Russian history: the official national emblem combines the red backdrop of the Soviet flag with the double-headed eagle of the tsars; the white-blue-red flag from the tsars was revived for use as the flag of the Russian Federation; military flags have kept elements of those used in the Soviet military; and new holidays that connect in some fashion to the past were created and given state support, as seen with the "Patriotic Birth" project in Vladimir Lenin's birth place.

In addition to preserving continuity with the past, Putin's notion of patriotism has also emphasized the need for unity, exemplified in his party, United Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the Russian people in a complicated identity crisis, which was left inadequately

resolved by the time Putin came to power. Without a singular, accepted paradigm for the people to see themselves in, various viewpoints were espoused by different parties and groups, and, as noted, there was a perceived risk of national disintegration. Putin viewed this as inherently dangerous. He noted that his first challenge was "creating the country's unity [and the] establishment of sovereignty of the Russian people, rather than the supremacy of individuals and groups, across its entire territory" (Putin, 2012). This is a very organic, singular view of the nation, one that rejects pluralism. It is one, like the idea of nationality under Nicholas, that elevates "the people" in an abstract sense, but one that rests upon a leader who will *create* national unity. Those who offer opposition, he has suggested on multiple occasions, lack patriotism, are allied with foreign agents who seek the destruction of Russia and thus are outside the parameters of the nation. A vote for him, as he suggested in his 2012 presidential victory speech, is a vote for "Great Russia" and against those who wish to destroy Russian sovereignty.<sup>12</sup>

Special mention should be made here of the prominent public role given to the ROC, under Putin, as this has clear analogs with Nicholas' use of Orthodoxy. The ROC, of course, was repressed under Soviet times, forced to take "a Faustian position with the state," that helped to legitimize the Soviet system (Billington, 2004, 158). This further weakened the ROC as a separate institution by allowing itself to become even more subservient to the will of the state than it was under the Tsars. The ROC, however, has survived. According to surveys taken in the early 2000s, between 70 and 80 percent of the population identify as Orthodox, which is just under the number of citizens who identify as ethnically Russian. However, only 40–60 percent of the population believes in God, which means that there is a significant number of people who identify as Orthodox but more in a cultural than theological sense (Laruelle, 2009, 161).

Putin's regime has made a clear attempt to call upon the ROC for legitimacy. In fact, the relationship between the state and the ROC could be said to be mutually beneficial. Each provides the other with legitimacy. The ROC offers strong support for state officials, thereby giving leaders legitimacy in the eyes of a self-identifying Orthodox population. For example, in February 2012 Patriarch Kirill called Putin's rule in the 2000s "a miracle of God" that corrected that "crooked twist of our history" in the 1990s. He dismissed the "shrieks" of those who protest against Putin.<sup>13</sup> In turn, the state offers moral and legal support to the ROC. In 2004, Putin remarked that "the process of reunifying the Russian Orthodox Church is much more than a process internal to the Church; it is the symbol of the rebirth and the reunification of the Russian people itself" (Laruelle, 2009, 168). Putin even goes so far as to say that the two pillars of national and state security are nuclear deterrence and Orthodox faith (Laruelle, 2009, 169). His 2012 election manifesto listed as a goal "preserving and upholding the spiritual and cultural values that contribute

<sup>12</sup> See coverage in *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, 6 March 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Reuters, February 8, 2012.

to Russian civilization's unique identity," which implicitly recognizes the importance of the ROC.<sup>14</sup> Putin endorsed legislation that makes it difficult for non-indigenous religions to register or acquire land or building permits, thereby eliminating much competition for the ROC. Putin, a former KGB officer, presents himself as a true believer and appears regularly in public with ROC officials. He is not only establishing continuity with the Russian past but also imbuing his rule with moral/cultural legitimacy. Vladislav Surkov, a top Kremlin aide, even suggested in 2011 that Putin was "sent by God" to save Russia – a clear echo to the Tsar as savior motive that one finds throughout Russian history.

The second element in Putin's "Turn of the Millennium" manifesto was power, defined primarily as the place and greatness of Russia in the world. For centuries Russia as a great power maintained prominence in images of Russianness and was used to legitimize the rulers. While Nicholas I's Official Nationality did not include any explicit mention of Russia as a great power, it was implicit in the nature of his reasons for developing the policy. Nicholas was acting to maintain Russia's power abroad by tightening domestic control. Putin has struggled to regain former power abroad by doing the same thing. By the time Putin became president, the country had lost all claims (except nuclear arms and a UN veto) to great power status. He does not hesitate to remind the Russian people of this; he calls the collapse of the Soviet Union the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" (Liñán, 2010, 168). As noted, he casts the 1990s in Russia as a very bleak time, which the people of Russia can easily agree with. So when Putin came to power he cast himself as the strong leader answering the call for a return to Russia's former glory.

Putin fiercely maintained the importance of seeing Russia as a major player in global politics. An excerpt from his "Turn of the Millennium" manifesto demonstrates this: "Russia was and will remain a great power. It is preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic and cultural existence. This determined the mentality of Russians and the policy of the government throughout the history of Russia and this cannot but do so at present" (Putin, 1999). The significance of this great power abroad was given sacred context as far back as 1510, when Muscovy was seen as a "Third Rome" and a messianic role was applied to Russia as the harbinger of Orthodoxy to the rest of the world (Bassin, 1999, 45). Putin played up that notion but instead of Orthodoxy as the idea to be spread by Russia's greatness, it is modernity and democracy, albeit of a Russian nature, that the Russian Federation stakes as its prerogative in the other post-soviet states known collectively as Russia's 'near abroad.' Without holding Russia to be a great power, the previously emphasized interest in garnering national pride and state centered patriotism has no natural path upon which to progress.

Finally, there is the notion of statism, which, has already been implied, is the primary leitmotif of Putin's project and has the clearest parallel with the Official Nationality

ideology of Nicholas. The state is central in Putin's view for a number of reasons: it ensures Russia's place in the world; it provides internal stability; it unifies the people; and it has historical resonance. Putin, in his "Turn of the Millennium" manifesto, was very clear about the importance of the state.

It will not happen soon, if it ever happens at all that Russia will become the second edition of say, the US or Britain, in which liberal values have deep historic traditions. Our state and its institutions and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and its people. For Russians a strong state is not an anomaly which should be got rid of. Quite the contrary, they see it as a source and guarantor of order and initiator and main driving force of any change. (Putin, 1999)

Where does democracy fit into this? As noted, Putin does not expressly reject democracy, and, unlike Nicholas, he does not publicly justify or praise autocracy. Indeed, in 2012 he noted that "any innovation must strengthen the democratic character of our state" (Izvestia, 2012). Ironically, the context of this quote was defending a law that would increase the fines for those engaged in street protests. The irony, it seems, is lost on him. Rather, under Putin, Russian leaders have embraced particular, modified versions of democracy, ones that, they would contend, better reflect Russian history and/or Russia's current situation. The two most well-known versions are "sovereign [suverennaia] democracy" and "managed [or guided] democracy" (Anderson, 2007; Petrov, 2005). Sovereign democracy, as defined by Kremlin adviser Vladislav Surkov, is a system in which "political powers, their authorities and decisions are decided and controlled by a diverse Russian nation for the purpose of reaching material welfare, freedom and fairness by all citizens, social groups and nationalities, by the people that formed it" (Surkov, 2006). While this conception has clear parallels with ideas of the nation and popular sovereignty that developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, what is notable in the Russian context is that this concept has been employed to emphasize state power (e.g. Russia is sovereign and will not be subjugated by other powers) and to justify an essentially one-party system that can represent the "diverse Russian nation" far better than smaller groups that will focus on more particular, not national, interests. "Managed democracy," which rests on centralized presidential power, control over the media, and employment of numerous resources to manage and control elections, is an even more puzzling concept, as it begs the question of who should be "managing" democracy and how the "sovereign" will of the people can be represented if democracy is managed by some other force. Of course, if one assumes that there is a harmonious, organic connection between the rulers and the ruled, the paradox is less pronounced. Still, even Dmitri Medvedev, speaking in 2006 before he became president, found something peculiar about the attempts to modify democracy. He noted, "If you take the word democracy and start attaching qualities to it that would seem a little odd. It would lead one to think that we're talking about some other, non-traditional type of democracy" (Medvedev, 2006).

Indeed, we are. To return to the observations earlier in this paper from Gerschenkron about "backwardness" and

<sup>14</sup> "Program 2012-2018" at available at [www.putin2012.ru](http://www.putin2012.ru), accessed May 23, 2012.

policy adaptation, in this instance we see a state borrowing a foreign practice and adapting to it in such a way that serves and strengthens the state. It includes the basic element of the original concept (e.g. elections) but it has been twisted in such a way that it is barely recognizable. Just as Nicholas I used an idea – nationalism – connected to political liberalization to further his statist and authoritarian system, one sees Putin modifying democracy to serve similar purposes. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that Putin himself claims that Russia should adopt “best practices” from abroad. For example, when discussing a law to increase fines for illegal street protests, he cites regulations on protests in Western democracies and the clear need to maintain order. However, this law, in contemporary Russia, is clearly designed to silence those – labeled as “radicals” – who disagree with him (Izvestia, 2012). As seen in this example, an idea from abroad is once again taken with the aim of empowering the state and disempowering Russian society.

## 5. Conclusion

In comparing Vladimir Putin to Nicholas I, this paper gives substance to more generic comparisons between past and contemporary Russian leaders as well as demonstrating a pattern in the globalization of political thought. As ideas spread and norms begin to take root in civil society, governments cannot wholly ignore them. They are required to respond, lest they risk losing legitimacy and, consequently, influence and power. In the case of Russia, a country that has traditionally had to play catch-up with the fore-bearers of modernity, Western norms have espoused political liberalization and subsequently challenged the very nature of Russian political rule. Popular sovereignty in the form of national will, as spread by the Napoleonic conquests, came to disrupt the fabric of Russian society at the dawn of Nicholas I's reign. Similarly, popular sovereignty in the form of democratic representation came to be perceived as a threat to the unity and stability of the Russian Federation at the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency. In both cases, the head of state, operating within the rhetorical parameters of the norms they were deflating, reconfigured notions of popular sovereignty to inhibit the growth of civil society, thereby protecting their roles as the center of the state, and the state's role as the center of society. Both Nicholas and Putin were able to do this, in part, because of the “advantage of backwardness” that allowed them to see how these norms might develop and take hold before it happened in Russia.

In this way, the Russian state has been able to distract its citizens from the undemocratic nature of Russian society by equating Russianness with love, respect, and the need for authority. However, there is no guarantee that such a strategy will be successful in the long run. In the case of Nicholas I, his statist approach, justified on grounds of stability and modernization, was found wanting given Russia's defeat in the Crimean War. This debacle in turn spurred a series of more liberal reforms (e.g. repeal of serfdom) under Alexander II. Today Putin's statist policies are coupled with rhetoric about the need for modernization. However, as seen during the 2011 and 2012 election

campaigns, the Russian people have begun to express discontent *en masse* with politics-as-usual and argue that genuine modernization will require more political liberalization and freedom for civil society. During his first two terms as president, Putin was able to fend off threats ‘from below’ in Russian society and build his popularity by contrasting his rule with the chaos of the Yeltsin years and with the help of systemic factors such as high oil prices. However, it is debatable if he can now easily co-opt or repress the protests led by younger, middle-class Russians who are aware that in political terms their country is well out of step with international norms of democratic practice. Put somewhat differently, Putin's statist approach contains self-contradictions, as the ability of a corrupt Russian state to deliver reform and modernization can easily be doubted. If and when the bubble that has sustained Putin to date pops, like with the Crimean war that coincided with the end of Nicholas' reign, Putin may come to regret the lack of democratic and sustainable reform that characterizes his leadership.

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